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ABSTRACT

The 1988 campaign is over, and once again the issue of the networks' coverage of the presidential campaign has been raised. Critics have concluded that the coverage of the campaign was reduced to "sound bites," tightly controlled debates and slick television ads. Unfortunately, little attention was paid to the most important issue in the campaign: "Who is the most qualified leader to guide our nation into the 1990s?" In the 1988 campaign the issues and strategies on both sides were focused on television attacks, counterattacks, and counter-counter attacks on patriotism, competence, and experience--qualities that should be inherent in any candidate for the office of the presidency. The public needs to hold our candidates and the media accountable for a thorough discussion of leadership-oriented issues. The questions is not whether the system needs to be reformed, but how and when. (MS)

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POST ELECTION ANALYSIS: TELEVISION AND LEADERSHIP

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POST ELECTION ANALYSIS: TELEVISION AND LEADERSHIP

One of the chapters in Theodore White's THE MAKING OF THE PRESIDENT: 1960 deals with the famous Nixon-Kennedy debates. In the chapter White presents a series of statistics on the number of television sets in America and the daily viewing habits of our nation's citizens, but he overlooked one of the most important influences on the 1960 presidential campaign- the television image. The 1988 campaign is over and once again the issue has been raised about the network coverage of the presidential campaign.

Critics have concluded that the coverage of the campaign was reduced to "sound bites", tightly controlled debates and slick television ads. In a campaign that some historians feel is the most negative in our history we learned about the pledge of allegiance, the state and federal furlough programs, the ACLU, the National Guard, and Boston Harbor. And let's not forget the story about the whales that dominated the network news for several days of the campaign. Unfortunately, little attention was paid to the most important issue in the campaign: "Who is the most qualified leader to guide our nation into the 1990's?"

In an INDEPENDENT SECTOR study on national leadership, John W. Gardner identified the six qualities that characterize effective leaders. First, the study concluded that leaders should focus on the long term

and see "beyond the day's crisis."

Second, effective leaders should "look beyond the unit they are heading" and have an understanding of external influences and a global perspective.

Third, they should "reach and influence constituents beyond their jurisdictions." Our leader needs to be able to work with leaders throughout the world in problem solving and planning for the future.

Fourth, effective leaders place a high priority on vision, values and motivation.

Fifth, they should have well developed political skills and the ability to deal with conflicting constituences.

Sixth, an effective leader needs an understanding of the concept of renewal in our ever-changing society.

In the 1988 campaign the issues and strategies on both sides were focused on television attacks, counterattacks, and counter-counter attacks on patriotism, competence, and experience--qualities that should be inherent in any candidate for the office of the presidency. In reviewing the campaign coverage I failed to see the connection between the concern for effective presidential leadership and the issues discussed. For example one of the major issues in the campaign should have been the future of our nation's youth.

The late Robert F. Kennedy made the comment in a 1964 speech that "the young are going ahead in their own way and in their own time . . . Across the globe they are a force of whirlwind proportions, and the world

of tomorrow will bear the imprint of their ideals and their goals. For this reason, we must be concerned about them." Both presidential candidates made brief claims about our youth, but where was the discussion in the debates, the campaign ads and "sound bites" about improving the quality of education, providing child care and dealing with youth oriented problems of gang crime and drugs.

As we consider another round of campaign reform we should once again raise the question Marshall McLuhan asked after the 1960 presidential campaign: "What has been the effect of TV on our political Life?" In the last few days media commentators and political analysts have debated the media coverage of campaigns including a special edition on ABC's NIGHTLINE that focused on who was to blame for this year's coverage of the campaign.

The public needs to hold our candidates and the media accountable for a thorough discussion of leadership oriented issues. Several interesting reforms have been suggested. CNN news expert, Ed Turner has urged candidates to have more debates, one news conference a week and require candidates to present substantive, issue-oriented "sound bites." National Public Radio commentators suggested we adopt a policy used in Chile that requires the major networks to set aside 30 minutes of free time each week (the month before the election) for each candidate to discuss the issues. Dr. Shapiro, president of Princeton University was in Canada last week and urges reformers to adopt the

Canadian debate format. The Canadian program provides a lively exchange between the candidates with a Lincoln-Douglas debate format.

John Chancellor, NBC News commentator recommended that "rules of political conduct" for presidential candidates should be developed and tied to the release of federal campaign funds. Les Crystal, NBC News expert suggests that the major networks adopt the extended political story format used by MacNeil/Lehrer. This format includes full coverage of candidate stump speeches. The question is not whether we need to reform the system but how and when.

Denis Brogan, author of THE FRENCH NATION 1814-1940 described the French as "a people which . . . had astonished the world in every field of achievement, . . . yet failed to find institutions that . . . gave them a political way of life worthy of their genius, their courage, their legitimate hopes. I hope that our tele-democratic nation can avoid this same fate as candidates begin to prepare for the 1992 campaign.